Japan conversation robot ready for outer space

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TOKYO (AP) -- The world's first space conversation experiment between a robot and humans is ready to be launched.

Developers from the Kirobo project, named after "kibo" or hope in Japanese and "robot," gathered in Tokyo Wednesday to demonstrate the humanoid robot's ability to talk.

"Russia was the first to go outer space, the U.S. was the first to go to the moon, we want Japan to be the first to send a robot-astronaut to space that can communicate with humans," said Yorichika Nishijima, the Kirobo project manager.

The experiment is a collaboration between advertising and PR company Dentsu Inc., the Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology, the University of Tokyo, Robo Garage and Toyota Motor Corp.

Tomotaka Takahashi, CEO of Robo Garage Co. and associate professor at the University of Tokyo, said he hopes robots like Kirobo that hold conversations will eventually be used to assist astronauts working in space.

"When people think of robots in outer space, they tend to seek ones that do things physically," said Takahashi. "But I think there is something that could come from focusing on humanoid robots that focus on communication."

Because Kirobo does not need to perform physical activities, it is smaller than most

robots that go into space. Kirobo is about 34 centimeters tall (13 inches) and weighs about 1 kilogram (2.2 pounds).

Its land-based counterpart Mirata looks almost identical but is not designed to go into outer space. Instead, it has the ability to learn through the conversations it has.

During the demonstration, Fuminori Kataoka, project general manager from Toyota, asked Kirobo what its dream was.

"I want to create a future where humans and robots can live together and get along," it answered.

Kirobo is scheduled to be launched from the Tanegashima Space Center on August 4, 2013.

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